

HOW THE WEST WAS WON

A SERIES OF REMARKABLE MISSIONARIES
OPENED THE CHURCH IN THE CANADIAN WEST

by EMILE TARDIF, OMI

The establishment of the Roman Catholic Church in Western Canada was slow. It followed the explorers and fur trading companies by more than a century, which gave the Hudson Bay Company reason to coin the satirical slogan from its initials: « Here Before Christ ».

The first glimmer of religious activity was due to the action of the explorer La Verendrye, who in 1727 provided a chaplain for the men of his expedition. In the 90 years that followed, five priests worked on the prairies.

It was Lord Selkirk who saw the need for a religious influence among his settlers, many of whom were French Metis. They were in a time of great unrest as they became involved in the wars between the fur traders.

In 1818, Father Joseph Provencher and Father Joseph Dumolin arrived at the settlement. Within two years, Father Provencher was named Bishop of St. Boniface, which marked the first real beginning of the Church in the West.

* * *

The Missionaries trickled in slowly. Many were remarkable men, including Father Georges Belcourt, who had a great influence on the whites and Indians. He helped to maintain peace in the colony.

Another was Father Jean Thibault, who established the first permanent mission in what is now Alberta.

The Church came to Alberta in 1828 when Father Pierre de Smet, a Jesuit, walked from Texas to the Battle River, by way of Edmonton and Jasper. He stopped only long enough to visit the Indian tribes and to perform 32 baptisms and eight marriages.

Other missionaries passed through, but even in those days they were more interested in « following the birds to Victoria », than staving on the prairies. The main reason was the larger, concentrated population.

In 1838, Father Thibault made his first visit to Fort Edmonton. Five years later he established a mission at « Devil's Lake », later changed to Lac Ste. Anne, 50 miles west of Edmonton.

During the ten years he worked in the area, 2,000 employees of the Hudson Bay Company and Indians joined the Church.

Father Thibault was responsible for bringing the Grey Nuns to Alberta. They arrived in Lac St. Albert in 1863

The Grey Nuns built many charitable institutions as they tried to meet the needs of the people. The result was a strong foundation for the Church.

* * *

As the need grew for more priests, Bishop Provencher convinced the Oblates of Mary Immaculate to work on the prairies. A steady flow of outstanding missionaries followed.

They established the Church throughout the West, into the north, including remote areas of Alaska. Some of their historic missions are: Ile a la Crosse, 1846; Athabasca, 1847; Great Slave Lake, 1852; Lac La Biche, 1853; St. Joachim in Fort Edmonton, 1854; and Good Hope on the Arctic Circle in 1859.

St. Albert was established in 1861, not as a mission station but as self-sustaining settlement with a school, convent, children's home and hospital.

It was the choice of the legendary Father Albert Lacombe, OMI, who was now working in the West after his arrival in St. Boniface in 1849.

He opened the first school in Fort Edmonton in 1862 with Brother Scollen, OMI, as the teacher, and an enrollment of 28 students.

Another of the great giants of the West, Father Vital Grandin, OMI, was named a bishop and consecrated in 1857 with his residence at Ille a la Cross. St. Albert became the seat of his diocese in 1871, an area that covered Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories.

Before Bishop Grandin died in 1902, he saw the Church grow with new vicariates organized in Athabasca in 1862, Prince Albert in 1889 and Mackenzie in 1901.

* * *

Edmonton became the main population centre in Central Alberta. As a result the diocese was moved there, from St. Albert, in 1912.

The Calgary diocese was established the same year and other ecclesiastical divisions followed rapidly. They were: Keewatin, 1910; Regina, 1915; Grouard, 1927; Saskatoon, 1933; Nelson, 1936; Kamloops, 1945; and St. Paul, 1948.

The Church had dug deep roots throughout Western Canada, a process that took 200 years from the arrival of the first missionary in the mid-West.

BISHOP GRANDIN: CORNERSTONE OF WEST

Vital Grandin was a shy man with a speech impediment, who overcame many difficulties to become a priest and reluctantly accepted the honors and responsibilities of a missionary bishop.

He was hardly the «he-man» type you would expect to find in the rough, frontier life of the Canadian West, where greedy men fought each other for land, where the ravages of disease and a cruel climate made each day a perilous adventure.

Yet, Bishop Grandin overcame his own limitations to emerge as a leader and champion of the rights of the Indians, Metis and Whites, and the father of the Roman Catholic Church in Alberta.

Today, his cause for canonization is under study in Rome. He has been proclaimed a candidate for sainthood, one of the preliminary steps in his beatification process which began in 1938.

Bishop Grandin was born in France, ordained at the age of 24, and left almost immediately for the missions of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Western Canada.

Only three years after his ordination he was named Coadjutor Bishop of St. Boniface. He was finally persuaded to accept the honor and returned to France for his consecration in 1859, two years after his appointment.

There were no airplanes, railroads or superhighways to carry the new bishop to the far — flung mission stations established by the Oblates. He tramped more than 25,000 miles on snowshoes during his lifetime, in addition to thousands of miles on horseback and by boat.

One tour lasted three years and carried him as far north as the Artic Circle to visit priests and brothers.

In 1871, Bishop Grandin was named the first bishop of St. Albert. His arrival in that hub of the West illustrates the feelings of the people towards him. It is described by Father Alezis Tetreault, OMI:

« He was met on his way by a large group of Metis riding on their gaily decorated ponies and was escorted

like a King to the bridge (the first built west of the Great Lakes), where the whole population awaited his arrival ».

While he may have been treated like a king, Bishop Grandin lacked the wealth that usually accompanies a throne. He was constantly begging for money to sustain his missions.

Bishop Gradin, with representatives of the other Churches, acted as intermediaries between the Indians and the federal government, persuading them to accept the reserves and treaties offered by the white men.

The bishop was a familiar figure in government offices in Ottawa, fighting for the rights of the Metis and was promised they, too, would receive land.

However, the survey was conducted in such a way as to destroy entire colonies and finally led to the bloodshed of the unsuccessful Riel Uprising of 1885.

Disease was a constant enemy for Bishop Grandin and his missionaries. Here is Father Tetreault's description of one encounter with smallpox:

« Bishop Grandin was at Carlton, where he found nearly everyone grievously ill. He made himself their doctor and their nurse. He helped them in every way, day and night, bringing them drink, encouraging them, washing them, closing the eyes of the dead and preparing their hideous corpses for the graves he, himself, dug ».

Bishop Grandin lived a life of total dedication until his death in 1902. He and the other great men of his era made the sacrifices demanded by the times, but they had a vision of the great future of this land.

They were the cornerstone on which the West was built.

Reprinted from the WESTERN CATHOLIC
REPORTER, 27 April, 1967.

"It Was All Worthwhile,,

BROTHER KRAUT CELEBRATES 60th ANNIVERSARY OF RELIGIOUS PROFESSION

On February 17th Brother Gerard Kraut commemorated the 60th Anniversary of his Religious Profession as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate. Special abservances were planned for the day at St Charles Scholasticate, Battleford. To mark this occasion we thought it appropriate to have the venerable Jubilarian give us a first hand account of some of his background and experiences. For the followintg interview we are grateful to Brother Ashley Materi. Ed.

Q. How and why was it, Brother Kraut, that you became an Oblate Brother?

A. For 20 years I had lived without thinking of becoming a religious. I enjoyed music, even played at the théâtre. Then, due to various circumstances, I became more serious, and at 25 years of age I entered the Noviciate. There was nothing special as to why I became an Oblate Brother. Ours was a good Catholic family. We were poor but had education. We lived in a Catholic atmosphere. There were often pilgrimages in honor of Our Lady in town, with much singing and a Mass at every hour on Sunday. My father was a good example. It was through him that my vocation came.

Q. When you received your Obedience for the Mackenzie Vicariate, what was your reaction?

A. There was no reaction. I just went. Once you start the work of the Lord in his vineyard, you

cannot kick back; you have to go. Divine Providence certainly had a part to play in my going to the Vicariate. At that time I was the only one who could do certain work that had to be done.

Q. Did the North meet your expectations?

A. I expected nothing. It was all new... my Obedience came so quick.

Q. What type of work did you do in the North?

A. In the winter I made a trip every week with the dog team. We had to hunt, to carry fish and travel with the bishop. On these trips we slept outside; I never really had a good sleep. Once in a while we were lucky to sleep in an Indian house. In the Summer I travelled with the boat. I was the engineer on the boat « Our Lady of Lourdes ». Taking care of the boat kept me busy.

Q. Would you tell us something more about that boat?

A. This as a diesel boat which was brought from San Francisco. It had a 40 foot mast and two sails. Bishop Breynat purchased it for \$ 24,000.00. Pope Pius XI contributed \$ 11,000.00 to pay for the boat. Bishop Breynat asked me to serve as engineer on the Arctic coast for two years; I stayed on for 20 years. There was no one else to do the job.

Sailing on the Arctic coast makes a person « learn to pray ». We had protection from God. Other boats sank. Ice made sailing dangerous. We had to be always « eyes open ». Over the winter we had to leave the boat on the shore. But some winters we could not pull the boat out of the water. Freezing water was bad splitting the wood. Sometimes we would hear a bang — a nail had been forced out of the wood for a quarter of an inch. But we were lucky; we had no serious damage.

Q. What were some of your most interesting assignments?

A. It was all interesting. It was not for pleasure that we did this but for the Lord.

Q. Did you not build a small grotto in one of your missions along the Arctic coast?

A. This was at Paulatuk. Bishop Breynat had friends in France who asked him to build a grotto in the North. They sent statues of Our Lady and of Bernadette for this purpose. So I had to build a grotto at Paulatuk. I hauled stones with my dogs. There was no lime, no mortar; so I used three galvanized pipes — bent them in some kind of shape and placed stones on top of these. To make a niche for the statue of Our Lady, I used a piece of galvanized sheet iron and placed flat stones around this. Later a wind came and blew a good part of the niche over.

Q. What were the people in the North like, the Indians and the Eskimos?

A. In general, they were good people. At our mission at Paulatuk, especially at Christmas and Easter, the families helped us wash and cook. There was one Eskimo woman at Paulatuk, Mary, who was just like the woman in the Gospel who gave her mite to the poor. Mary gave all she had, all her riches. She did a great service by gathering wood — this helped us in the baking of our bread.

Q. No doubt, at times it got lonely. At such times what was your greatest consolation?

A. No, it was not lonely. Brother Beckschaefer was my consolation (Bro. William Beckschaefer). He was « a real mother to me ». His motto was: « Immer heiter! Gott hilf weiter! » Close to the end of his life when someone said to him that he didn't

seem to be worried about the end, he replied: « All my life I did my best. Now it is for the Lord to look after me ». To be able to say something like that is « wunderbar ». The Grey Nuns were also a source of consolation. To see them work with the children gave me courage. They gave us courage; we gave them courage.

Q. Did you make a trip back to Germany while still in the North?

A. After 22 years at St Joseph's mission, I made a trip to Germany. While there I wrote a magazine serial: The Missionary and his dogs, for Der Weinberg — the magazine had another name at that time. Through this serial my name became known in Germany « like a white horse ».

Q. What was your diet while you were in the North?

A. For breakfast we had porridge and beans. For dinner we had meat — fresh meat when we had some, other wise dry meat. The dry meat was very nourishing even though it was very tough to chew. The meat dried was usually that taken from the sides of a cariboo. In the evening for supper we had fish. We kept the fish by cutting off their heads and hanging them from the ceiling in the shack. They kept for a long time.

Q. Where you ever sick, did you have any serious ailments?

A. My back gave me much trouble while I was in the North. The cold made it worse. Ten years before going to the Arctic coast I had hurt my back hauling some coal up a hill. Since that time I have always had some trouble with my back. (Brother Kraut is a firm believer in the Kneipp method).

Q. How do you feel now in looking back over the years of your apostolate in the North?

A. I was in the North altogether for 46 years. I would never have quit if I wouldn't have had trouble with my back. But it was all worthwhile. We had to work for spreading the Faith — that was worthwhile. It is something that demands all his efforts.

Q. Since you came to Battleford you have taken care of those in our community who could not properly care for themselves, such as Bro. Schumacher, Father Meyer and Father Schickler. Was this not a difficult task?

A. No, it was not difficult. It is something that has to be done. I tried my best for these. I had done something of this kind of work at Aklavik. There I took care of Father Gouy when he could no longer take care of himself.

Q. You have been an Oblate Brother for 60 years. What are your thoughts on the occasion of your anniversary?

A. For me it has « not a big meaning ». I remember what one Sister said to me: « Brother, don't think we are saints! » I am a sinner and I look for « misericordia » from the Lord. Life is like a dream — it goes very fast. As long as in the end we can say what Brother Beckschaefer said: « All my life I did my best. Now it is for the Lord to look after me ».

Q. Do you have a motto, Brother?

A. « Donnerwetter! ».

Reprinted from O.M.I. NEWSLETTER,
St. Mary's Province, Feb. 1967.

PRINCE GEORGE

Thriving Life on the Grow-Grow Frontier

by **FRANK DOLPHIN**

The forests of British Columbia have a modern Paul Bunyan, whose feats would rival anything done by the legendary American hero.

He is Bishop Fergus O'Grady, O.M.I., of Prince George, a city in the centre of a province on the move. As the fruits of development blossom on all sides, this 59-year-old Oblate is not only benefiting from it, but helping to give it a human dimension.

Among his accomplishments during 12 years in the B.C. interior is the building of schools, churches, and Prince George College, a high school with the first two years of university.

The college has been granted a charter by the provincial government, which will, in time, allow it to become a degree-granting institution.

Most important of all is his creation of a new spirit, expressed through a practical organization, which allows lay people to use their talents solely in the service of other people.

His name is known across Canada as the bishop who invites people to join the Oblate Frontier Apostles and work for \$25 a month. Men and women also come from the United States, Europe, and as far as Australia.

He has started a new project which will attempt to translate the lofty principles of Vatican II into the ingredients of daily living, housing, recreation facilities, adult education, respect for other people.

The boom that Bishop O'Grady has created in his sparsely-settled northern diocese is but part of the explosive growth underway in an area teeming with resources and riches.

* * *

THIS CITY of 25,000 people (twice that in the area) is the action-centre of a boom that U.S. News & World Report says is «outpacing most of the rest of the country in economic development».

Oldtimers, residents of more than five years, exhibit a cautious pride when they show-off the three new pulp mills, a \$4,000,000 shopping centre, the ten-storey Inn of the North, and the new housing developments.

At the Outrigger, whose South Pacific lines contrast sharply with the stodgy, downtown architecture, the luncheon conversation is land: who owns the parcel across the Nechako River; how much the corner lot sold for; who's planning a high-rise office tower.

You sense, too, that the new-found enthusiasm for an old town (conservative estimate of 75,000 people by 1975) is on a short leash. With the vagaries of the lumber industry, there is the lurking fear that the bubble could burst.

«It's lumber that makes the money for this town», said Bernard McKenzie, an official of the local Canada Manpower Centre.

Prince George has two pulp mills in operation, each costing \$80 million, with a third under construction. They will employ a total of 1,500 men.

Giving the interior a broader and more stable economic base, is the huge Endako Mines molybdenum complex, a few miles from Prince George. Two major copper mines are also being developed.

To the north is the exciting Portage Mountain Dam project, still under construction. It will create

a new lake with a 1,000-mile shoreline and become a major tourist attraction.

The boom has levelled off this year, but there is confidence that it will regain its momentum after services catch up to demand.

Tourists will continue to pour money into the interior with its eye-catching scenery and lakes for swimming and fishing. Completion of the Yellowhead route from Edmonton will make it a mecca for prairie people in search of holiday resorts.

Hotels are crowded in Prince George with construction workers for most of the year. Many who accept transfers here come with the intention of making a fast buck but never intending to sink their roots.

« We have many transients, which makes it difficult to build a stable community », Bishop O'Grady said.

* * *

HE HAS introduced a new breed of transients, not the payday-brawling construction workers and logger, but men and women who have come to teach school, nurses, secretaries, craftsmen and laborers.

When he was named Bishop of the Vicariate of Prince Rupert (it recently became the diocese of Prince George) Bishop O'Grady recognized that Prince George was where the action is and moved there himself. A quick survey indicated that schools and some churches were needed throughout the 90 missions, dotted across the 150,000 square miles.

He couldn't afford expensive building materials or hire workers, so he launched the Frontier Apostles in 1959. They built eleven schools, three churches and the college, manufacturing many of the materials used.

They're ordinary men and women with specialized or professional training, who want a challenge and are

willing to dedicate one, two, or more years to what the bishop calls « the missions ». A few will spend the rest of their lives in the diocese.

Maclean's Magazine called them « the backwoods peace corps ». They work for their room and board and \$ 25 a month. Those who aren't directly involved in teaching, nursing, or in the parishes, work at ordinary jobs and give their paychecks to support the project.

Later this month, a group of 29 from Ireland will arrive at the college to join about 130 others for a threeday orientation course, before moving out to remote points.

The volunteer program is headed by Arleigh Fitzgerald, a Peterborough, Ont., schoolteacher, and Father Gerard Clenaghan, OMI, an Irishman, who handles the overseas recruiting.

While Bishop O'Grady doesn't make any promises, a strong argument for many girls to join the program is the fringe-benefit of a potential husband.

The bishop chuckles when he tells of the 90 marriages that have resulted from the 400 people who have taken part in the program to date.

* * *

WHAT DOES the challenge of working for almost nothing do for the men and women? Bishop O'Grady said it matures them more in one year than four years at home.

« Parents notice a marked difference in their young people. They learn to share and how to be considerate with others. They grasp a broad view of the Church », he said.

Nora Archbold of Dublin said she couldn't express what her year in Prince George has done for her, but « it has done a lot ».

During the summer months, a group of high school students known as « Christophers » spend about six weeks at the college, helping with the work of painting and redecorating.

A volunteer of three months, Donna Marie Dobie, 21, a former Bell Telephone employee from Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., said, « We're not trying to convert the world. People look at us kind of funny, then discover that we're like their own sons and daughters ».

They are helping to build a private school system, which Bishop O'Grady believes will one day receive financial aid from the provincial government.

In the meantime, he is determined to make it more than just a high school and a university. He views the college as a social and cultural centre, through which the decrees of Vatican II could take on life and make an impact on the people of the interior.

He has acquired 5,000 acres of land around the college, partly as a financial backstop, but mainly to create a new city. It would attempt to incarnate the principles of social action, taught for so many years, but rarely attempted to implement.

A start has already been made on 100 acres of the choice residential land, tucked away in the hills, adjoining Prince George.

« College Heights », with paved streets, underground wiring for streetlights and a mountain view is expected to attract 300 new homes. Several houses are occupied, others are under construction, ranging in price from \$18,000 to \$25,000.

The development will include low-income housing and Bishop O'Grady wants to begin co-op housing. The whole project has room for 150,000 people.

Father John Page, S.J., associé professor of the faculty of architecture at the University of Manitoba, is enthusiastic about the possibilities, although he

does not favor the Church of the college becoming a townbuilding corporation.

He wrote to Bishop O'Grady, « For many years, the Church has spoken of social action, of the need for social justice, for the provision of living conditions for low income families, in an environment that is conducive to the upbuilding of the human personality.

« ... never before has there been present an opportunity for a full-scale experiment in Christian social action in conjunction with a Christian centre of education ».

* * *

BISHOP O'GRADY is plunging ahead to carry his diocese on the wave of the new grow-grow society. He sees his priests, religious and lay people struggling to meet the Church's commitments.

He's known as a man of action, one whose idealism is deeply-rooted in today's realities.

He lives simply in the « palace », a modest bungalow in the woods near the college. He eats his meals with the volunteers and offers Mass in his cathedral, a simple A-frame chapel on the campus, that might seat 100 people.

But watch out when you talk to Bishop O'Grady. His apostles say the second or third sentence is usually, « Will you come to Prince George for a year or two? »

Reprinted from the WESTERN CATHOLIC
REPORTER, 24 August, 1967.

MISSIONS
OF
THE CONGREGATION
OF
The Missionary Oblates
OF
MARY IMMACULATE

94ST VOLUME (1967)

N. 322 - Septembre, 1967



00165 - ROMA

GENERAL HOUSE O.M.I.

290, Via Aurelia, 290